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*It's not your father's old blue-collar Boeing city anymore*

# Renton has new swagger in its step

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**BY STUART ESKENAZI**  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

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## < Renton

FROM A1

### OLD BOEING CITY CHANGING FAST

#### Upscale housing, retail, Seahawks

Boeing has 11,000 jobs in Renton, and auto dealerships account for a quarter of the city's sales-tax revenue.

But Renton is no longer all about shift changes. Rather, it is about shifting and changing its very identity.

The trigger for this latest chapter in the life of the century-old city dates to 1992, when 6,500 Boeing 777 workers transferred to Everett.

"We took a deep breath and asked ourselves, 'What do we want to be when we grow up?'" Mayor Kathy Keolker said.

#### Ikea first coup

Renton's remodel began when it lured Swedish home-furnishings giant Ikea to town in 1994, bringing style to the warehouse district of town. With style came creative substance. Classmates.com was founded in Renton, and the hobby games company Wizards of the Coast is headquartered there, too.

And yet, Renton's blue-collar reputation persists.

Ben Wolters, Renton's economic-development director, said he has an easier time selling Renton to out-of-state developers who have no preconceived notions about the city. They simply look at the map, study the demographics and conclude Renton is a great place to invest.

Along with large tracts of relatively cheap and developable land, another selling point is Renton's location at the nexus of Interstate 405 and Interstate 5, only 10 minutes from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

#### "Trifecta" city

"Renton is the trifecta with Bellevue and Seattle," said Natalie Quick, spokeswoman for Harvest Partners, the Dallas-



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### Median single-family home price

Closed sales, April 2006

**Renton** \$374,000**Seattle** \$439,475**Bellevue** \$617,000**King County, all areas**  
\$420,000

Source: Northwest Multiple Listing Service

team in the area.

Renton making a pass at the Sonics elicited snickers from those whose perception of the city is stuck in a previous time, when thrills were had by cruising the downtown loop in a souped-up ride or cashing in a winning ticket at Longacres.

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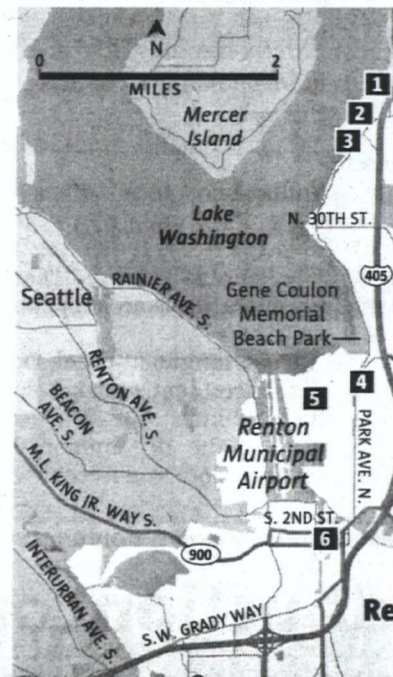
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ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

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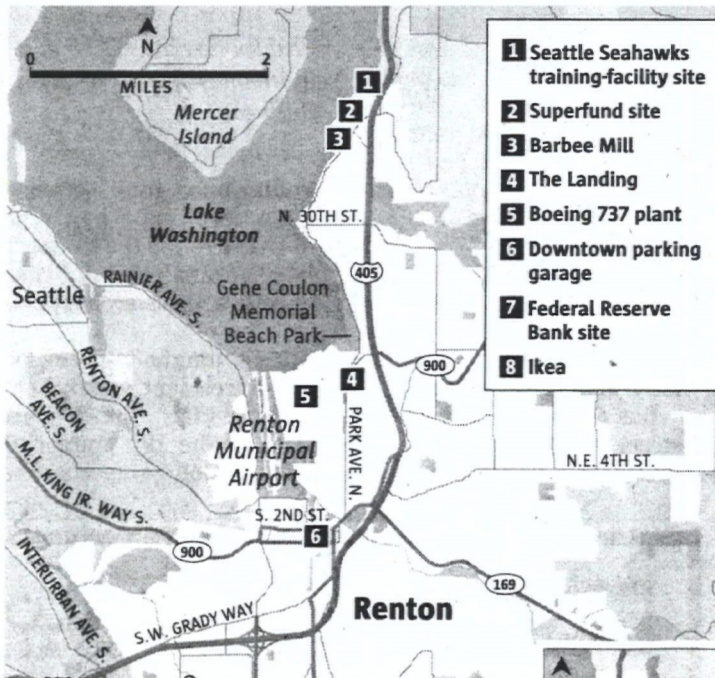
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Southport, where a new luxury apartment house already has been built and another is going up.

Boeing employees already use Southport. On break, they relax on blue chaise lounges on the pier or ramble along the path toward Gene Coulon Memorial Beach Park.

"This is another of those places where we take developers on our tour and they say, 'I never knew,'" Wolters said.

Farther up the shore, the Seahawks plan to build a practice facility that would be the second-largest in the NFL when it opens in summer 2008. Renton has agreed to pay for most, if not all, of the roads leading to the site.

Luck may have played a role in the Seahawks' decision to build in Renton — team owner Paul Allen owned the land. But the team's investment could hasten the development of two adjacent large lakefront parcels.

At Barbee Mill, a former lumber mill, the owner already plans to build a subdivision of luxury town houses. The third parcel is contaminated, but recently became eligible for federal cleanup money.

### Auto deal

To revive Renton's languishing downtown, the city made it financially worthwhile for auto dealerships there to move to a strip along I-405.

That freed up land where the city built the 560-stall parking garage, along with a civic-events center, transit center and park.

Keolker said the city struggled over making such a major investment "but a city has to show that it believes in itself enough to invest in itself before it can expect others to invest."

Private investment came from Dally Properties, which has built three apartment houses — 258 units in all — that target professional singles and childless couples.

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"Part of its appeal also is that it is very willing to work with developers. The city is open for business in ways that some other cities around here aren't as much."

As self-assured as Renton has become, it also is self-aware. The city is using the Sonics as much as the Sonics appear to be using the city.

"We don't really care if the Sonics are playing us as a stalking horse," Wolters said. "We've gotten \$1 million of free publicity out of it, and that's great because it gives us the chance to tell our story."

After the Sonics' brass began negotiating a new lease for Seattle's KeyArena, Renton brashly jumped in, along with Bellevue, offering another possible option for keeping the NBA



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With cruising long ago outlawed and the racetrack now a Boeing business park, it is no longer a joke when growth-minded city leaders say with all seriousness that within 30 years, Renton will be the third urban center on Lake Washington, with Seattle and Bellevue.

"I don't think of Renton as part of the South End anymore," said Don Dally, a Seattle-based developer whose investment in downtown Renton helped spark an economic revival there. "It's really the Eastside now."

After Renton decided to go after the Sonics, Don Bressler, president of Renton Technical College, shot an e-mail to a top city official.

"I told him we had started selling shirts at our bookstore that said 'Renton Sonics,'" Bressler recalled. "Of course, we hadn't. But wouldn't it be funny if we sold them through our Rotary Club?"

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Bressler's technical college is part of a Renton stakeholders group that also includes the city, Valley Medical Center, the school district and the chamber of commerce. Together, they market Renton and plan its future.

Keolker said the various institutions are pretty much of one mind about the type of growth that's best for Renton, and that consensus clears the way to go forward aggressively.

The city is helping that along by making zoning changes, offering property-tax abatements, paying for new roads and utility upgrades and, in select cases, waiving development fees.

When Boeing let it be known in 2001 that it planned to sell off 68 acres of surplus land near its 737 plant, possibly for another industrial use, Renton said not so fast, much to Boeing's chagrin.

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Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas

center for shopping, living, working and playing.

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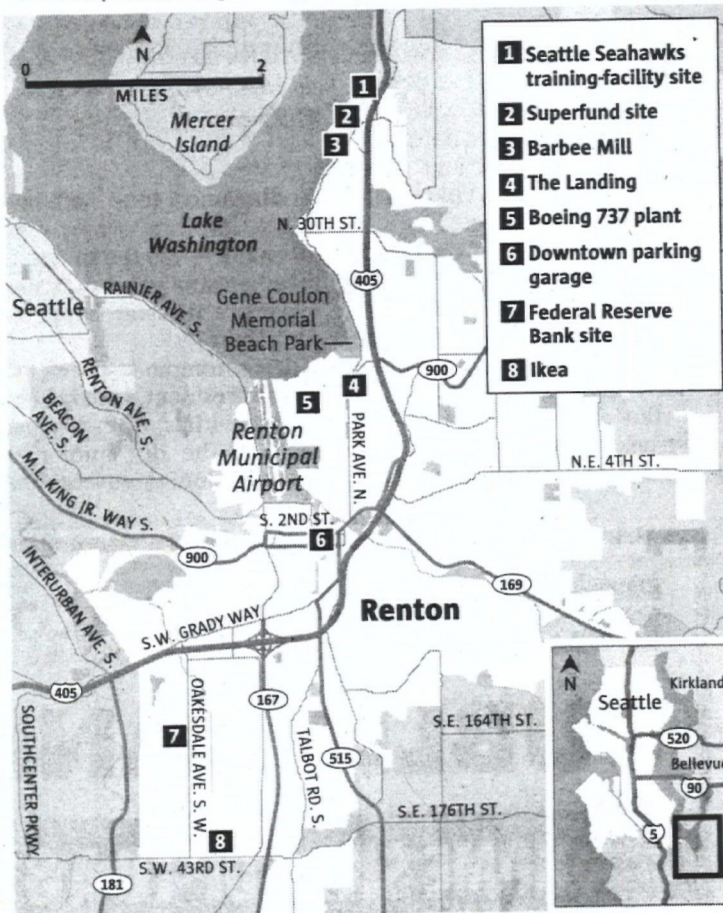
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eral Reserve Bank is building a new branch office to complete its move from downtown Seattle. As a result, Renton soon will be able to boast it has the largest cash repository west of Denver and north of Phoenix.

Other development is taking place along the shores of south Lake Washington:

The site of a former Puget Sound Energy steam plant has been rezoned for offices and a hotel. The development would extend the lakefront enclave of

the site.

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The investments sparked more downtown redevelopment. Longtime downtown eateries moved into new digs, and new restaurants opened up, including the upscale Fin N Bone.

Owner-chef Jerry Jackson, who launched the restaurant in December, put Copper River salmon on the menu recently and sold out of it in one night.

"The people moving here have that kind of palate and want that kind of dining experience," he said.

The old McLendon Hardware downtown is now home to the Evergreen City Ballet, which operates an academy there.

A ballet. In Renton.

From on high, "looking down on Renton" has a whole new meaning.

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